

Hey Cinderella, You Dropped Your Shoe by dirtybinary

Posted: Found as a capture on the Wayback Machine

Canon: Captain America

Pairing: Steve Rogers/Bucky Barnes

Rating: Teen [PG]

Word Count: 7,515

Summary: Due to the technological limitations of the '40s, Steve is Captain America by day and a scrawny little guy by night. His daily transformations are as painful as they were the first time, and he really shouldn't be going on night missions, but that doesn't stop him from trying to find Bucky after the helicarriers go down.

Featuring overprotective!Sam, matchmaker!Natasha, and the Winter Soldier's undying love for Skinny Steve.

"Oh, God," said Sam, as the porch light flickered on. He peered down at Steve from the lofty height of five foot eleven, looking bewildered and still half asleep. "Steve? I—think?"

"Yeah." Steve scowled at him, daring him to laugh. It was well past midnight, and he was soaked to the skin and sporting an impressive array of cuts and bruises, and he was in no mood to comment on his current stature or lack thereof. "Can I come in?"

"Uh, sure." Sam pulled the door all the way open and stepped back to let Steve through, staring at him as if he were an asteroid that had just hit. "But I think you got some explaining to do, Cap."

"You gotta be kidding," Sam said, as soon as Steve managed to stop his teeth from chattering long enough to give him the highly abridged run-down of their present Situation (with a capital S, as in, Gentlemen, we have a Situation, said in a Nick Fury voice with matching glower). "Or I'm dreaming. I'm dreaming, right?"

Steve shook his head wearily. "Fraid not."

He was wearing one of Sam's t-shirts (which threatened to swallow him whole), holding an ice pack to his bruised cheekbone while Sam dabbed antiseptic lotion on the long cut above his brow. The rain had stopped. Outside, the yard was still and quiet, the humid air heavy and

sluggish in his lungs. "Let me get this straight," Sam said. "You're only beefy by day, and after sunset you're—you're—"

"Puny?" Steve supplied.

He could almost see Sam clawing desperately for a handful of tact. "Petite," Sam said firmly.

Steve had to smile, sagging against the back of the couch with a subdued flump. If he'd tried that in the daytime, the couch might have lost a screw or two. "Pretty much," he said. "I subsist on sunlight."

"Technology from the '40s, man," said Sam. He scrubbed the back of his hand over his eyes, and stared at Steve again. "So, okay, my first guess was wrong, you didn't get zapped back by some new alien overlord with plans for world domination." Steve gave him an incredulous look, which he ignored. "You shrink down like this every evening, right? So you were already—petite—when you walked into that HYDRA bunker tonight and tried to raid it yourself? Seriously?"

"All ninety pounds of me," Steve agreed. "Well, it's probably more like a hundred and ten now, what with improved nutrition and all—" He realised that Sam looked outraged. "What? I thought I saw Bucky go inside. What else was I supposed to do, sit down at the front door and wait for you to drive over?"

"Yes," said Sam without missing a beat. "Yes, Steve, that is exactly what anyone with a modicum of common sense would have done."

He resumed dabbing at Steve's cuts. Steve sighed. He was used to being fussed over when he was in Skinny Mode, as the other Avengers called it; he just wasn't used to the fusser not being Bucky. "I searched about two floors before they spotted me and I had to run like hell," he said. "The one good thing about this? No one recognised me."

"Not surprised," said Sam.

Steve grinned ruefully. Nobody looked at a tiny floppy-haired kid and thought Captain America. "Nat said this would be really useful for undercover work, if I actually knew the first thing about going undercover."

Sam shook his head in disbelief. "It's just—how the hell is this not public knowledge? Good idea to keep your tactical weaknesses secret, I get that, but how'd you manage when you were in the army?"

"It wasn't too hard," Steve said. As a matter of fact, he'd kept lots of other things secret during his time in the army, this being the least among them. "Bucky led the night missions, I stayed at

base and did radio stuff. Peggy and the Colonel covered up for me. We had a few slip-ups, some of Schmidt's people found out, but we shut them up the hard way."

He shivered, and gave a monstrous sneeze. "Shit," said Sam. He disappeared into his room for a moment and came back with a thick blanket that he draped around Steve's shoulders. "You better get some sleep. Is it gonna hurt? When you, um, grow back?"

Steve got up and started to follow him to the guest bedroom. "You know the time you made me watch Harry Potter with you, and there was that one professor who was a werewolf?"

Sam winced, and Steve could tell he saw where this was going. "Lupin, yeah."

"It's a bit like that, except I learnt how to do it quietly when I was in the army—"

Something stirred at the periphery of his vision. He spun round to face the window. It was almost pitch black in the yard, and his night vision was hopeless, but he could have sworn the shadows had moved, even though there was no wind. "Someone's there," he said.

In a heartbeat, Sam had knocked him flat to the floor and thrown himself over him. Steve's jaw made intimate and rather painful acquaintance with the rug. For a moment they both strained to listen, but there was nothing. "Ow," Steve said, trying to wriggle free. "Get off, Sam, this really isn't necessary."

"Shush." Sam rolled away and grabbed a pistol from under the coffee table. Steve wasn't sure when exactly Sam had started keeping firearms concealed around his house, but he had the guilty feeling that his and Natasha's sudden precipitation at the doorstep the other time had something to do with it. "Stay down," Sam said. "I'mma go take a look."

He crept across the room, gun cocked and ready. Steve was up in an instant, hurrying after him with his shield on his arm, even though it was far too unwieldy for him to throw when he was like this. "Don't fire," he said urgently. "It's probably Bucky."

Sam threw the window open and pointed his pistol at the shadows outside. There was no sound other than the distant hum of crickets and the rustle of wind in the trees. Then a car went past with its headlights on, splintering the dark with twin beams of white light, and something glinted between the hedges at the far side of the yard, something polished and metallic. For a fleeting moment they were both aware of a man-shaped silhouette watching them from the road's edge. Then it flitted into the hedges and disappeared.

"Bucky!" Steve yelled. He swung one leg across the windowsill and would have gone sprinting out into the dark, if Sam hadn't seized him by the belt and held him back. "Buck, don't go!"

"He's gone," Sam said, pulling him away. "Now, for God's sake, let me close the window before you get pneumonia or something."

"He did that on purpose," Steve said. He plastered himself up against the window as soon as Sam slid it shut, cupping his hands around his face to block out the reflection of the room light. "If he wanted to be invisible, he'd cover up his arm. He needs help, Sam, what if he gets himself hurt or recaptured when I'm like this and I can't do anything—"

He trailed off. Sam squeezed his shoulder, twitching the blanket back into place. "Then," he said, "he'll just have to make do with me. And, y'know, he's probably gonna do a lot worse than throw me off a helicarrier if you catch a cold on my watch, so—"

"Yeah, yeah," Steve said, stifling another sneeze, and trying to hide his disappointment. "Bed."

At precisely 06:49 the next morning, Steve emerged from the guest bedroom and padded out into the kitchen, where Sam was busy scrambling eggs. "Hey."

Sam turned around so fast, Steve immediately knew he'd been waiting. He looked Steve up and down, and his eyes widened. "Oh, look at you," he said. "All grown up."

He was smiling, but his eyes were worried, and Steve wondered how much he'd overheard. He thought he'd done a pretty good job muffling his screams with a pillow while his bones lengthened and his muscles ballooned, but then again, Sam was more perceptive than most. "Real funny," he said, trying to sound cheerful. "You know I eat enough for six, right?"

"It's just accelerated puberty," Sam said. "Don't worry, Cap, my kitchen can handle you."

Steve's phone rang as he was helping Sam get out the plates and cutlery. "Nat," he said, pressing it to his ear with his shoulder. "You know it's barely even morning here, right?"

"It's afternoon in Moscow," said Natasha's languid voice, slightly muffled by static. Steve pictured her lounging in a posh hotel suite with her feet on a table and a bottle of vodka by her side, and he smiled. God, he missed her. "'Sides, you can't sleep past sunrise, can you? Sharon's got a friend, by the way, a dorky little accountant with cute glasses. Right up your alley. If you're free tonight—"

"Romanoff," Steve said, "did you seriously phone me all the way from Moscow to set me up with another girl? Because I appreciate the effort, but I'm busy."

Sam snickered, and Steve elbowed him in the ribs. "It's a boy this time," Natasha said. "Does that change your answer?"

"Not in the least," Steve said. "But congrats on moving past your heteronormative assumptions."

"Oooh," said Natasha. "Big word. Someone's been brushing up on his twenty-first century vocabulary, huh?"

"I'm hanging up."

"Patience," she said. "I was just getting to the good stuff. You got a pen and paper?"

Steve looked around and spotted a pencil and notebook on the coffee table. "Yeah," he said, going over. "Why?"

"I'm going to read you fifteen addresses," Natasha said. "Every single one of the Winter Soldier's known safehouses in D.C. I'd e-mail you, but you won't know how to decrypt the file. You ready?"

"Yeah—woah, slow down!"

She started reciting at top speed, and he scribbled frantically. He hadn't imagined that Bucky would be so well-equipped for surviving on the run. By the time she was done, he'd covered two pages and most of a third, and Sam had stopped clattering around to watch. "Wow, this is great," Steve said. He held up the notebook and mouthed Bucky at Sam. "How'd you get hold of these?"

"Don't ask me how questions," Natasha admonished. "You know my methods. I can't help you if he's left town, but—"

"No, he's still here," Steve said. That, at least, he knew for sure. "Thanks, Nat. I owe you. This—this means a lot to me."

"Right," said Natasha, sounding extra brusque, the way she did whenever Steve threatened to get sappy on her. "Now, back to that accountant. He works two streets down from the Triskelion. Why don't you give it a shot? You can go pick him up when he knocks off tonight and, I don't know, maybe take him for a romantic stroll by the river where you almost drowned."

"You know I can't," Steve said, starting to feel dejected all over again. "I'll be skinny tonight."

She made a dismissive noise. "So? I've seen you when you're skinny, and you still looked fine. You've got to work through all these body image issues of yours, Steve. Hiding yourself away after dark isn't going to help any."

"That's not for you to say." He wanted to tell her that she probably didn't even know how it felt to be weak and unattractive, but couldn't think of a way to put it without sounding creepy or patronising. Then there was a burst of static, and he heard a sound from Natasha's end that made him forget his point altogether. "Nat? Are those gunshots?"

"Yeah, gotta go," she said, sounding resigned. So much for Steve's mental image of the vodka and the suite. "Guess I'll ask if he's free on weekend afternoons. Give Wilson my love." She hung up before Steve could say another word.

He sighed, heading back into the kitchen with the list of addresses. "She all right?" Sam asked.

"Yeah," Steve said. "She sends you her love."

To his immense gratification, Sam nearly walked into a stool. He cleared his throat loudly and snatched the notebook from Steve. "So," he said, drumming his fingers on the table, "your guy's staying at one of these places?"

Steve felt a slow grin spread across his face. As soon as Natasha got back stateside, he decided, he was going to set her up on a few dates of her own. "Probably," he said. He tore off the first two pages of addresses and handed Sam the third. "I'll get started on these while you're at the VA, make the most of the daylight hours. You'll join me when you're done?"

"Sure," said Sam. "But please tell me you'll get your ass out of there before sunset."

"Of course," said Steve. "I am, after all, a responsible adult."

As it turned out, he still had one last house on his list when the sun started to go down, and he figured he might as well finish it off.

It wouldn't take long, anyway. The first eight or nine places had been thoroughly deserted, full of dust and cobwebs, and there was no sign that Bucky—or really, any living creature at all—had set foot there recently. He left his bike in the driveway of the last house and squinted through a dark window, feeling like a man on the moon looking for clues of life. There was nothing, unless you counted the bearded fellow who stuck his head over the fence and scowled at him from next door.

Steve waited for the man to go back inside, bashed the lock open with the edge of his shield, and let himself in.

This place wasn't as dusty as the others. There was a bedroom, a sitting area, a cramped kitchen and a shoebox-sized bathroom, all apparently quite empty, but Steve was beginning to get a good feeling anyway. He checked the fridge and the kitchen cupboards—nothing except for a bag of expired crackers—and headed for the bedroom. The door was ajar. He started to push it open. Then the thought struck him that the Winter Soldier would hardly leave a door half open without a damned good reason, and he drew back sharply.

There was a rifle mounted on the top of the bedroom door. It took him only a minute to work out why—it was a booby trap, cunningly rigged to rain down a hail of bullets as soon as anyone opened the door. "Clever, Buck," Steve said aloud, in case he was listening somewhere. "But this wasn't meant for me, I hope."

He did some quick calculations and let fly his shield. It hit the rifle, which discharged several bullets and tumbled to the floor. Steve opened the door and stepped through. There was a narrow bed by the wall, covered by a thin fraying quilt, but his eyes were drawn instead to the spindly desk by the window. There was a sheaf of papers on it—printouts from various history websites, he realised as he leafed through them. Bucky had been doing his homework.

Steve recognised the first few pages from the interactive site that came with his Smithsonian exhibit. A long section detailed the history of the Howling Commandos and their joint exploits. All the names were underlined—Barnes, Dernier, Dugan and the rest—but every time Steve was mentioned, his name was circled twice. Then there was another page devoted entirely to his friendship with Bucky. This was heavily annotated as well—there were ticks and question marks in the margins, and untidy notes had been scrawled beneath them. Remember this, Bucky had written next to a paragraph about his rescue from Zola's lab. No, beside another bit about him working extra hours to help with Steve's medical bills. And then, ??? maybe beside a sentence about them sharing an apartment after Steve's parents had passed away.

The last page was certainly not from the Smithsonian site. It was titled *On the Nature of Captain America's Relationship with Bucky Barnes*, and seemed to be a scholarly treatise about whether or not Steve had been fucking his best friend. This one hadn't been annotated at all, but the page was as creased and bent as the others, so he knew Bucky had read it too.

"You've been Googling us," Steve murmured, awed. This was good news, right? He pulled his phone from his pocket to call Sam, and then he saw the time and nearly stopped breathing.

He'd lost more time than he realised, disarming the booby trap and going through the papers. There was no way he was going to make it home or to Sam's place before he changed back—the risk of shrinking down in the middle of traffic and losing control of his bike was too much. He would have to change here. Sam was going to be so pissed. (And so would Bucky, Steve thought with a sinking heart, if he ever found out that Steve was out raiding safehouses alone when he was skinny. Even if said safehouse was his own.)

There was nothing for it. Steve snapped a photo of the papers (making sure that the last article wasn't visible, because he could really do without the inevitable teasing) and sent it to Sam, captioned with a "!!!". As an afterthought, he added, Back soon, am safe, don't worry. Then he shoved his phone back into his pocket and sat down on the bed to wait it out.

At least shrinking down wasn't as painful as growing back. The worst part, really, was the clothes—he was going to look like a half-starved twelve-year-old trying on his father's shirts, though hopefully this time his jeans wouldn't fall down while he drove home. He curled up against the wall with his eyes shut, feeling breathless and dizzy. It was better not to watch. His limbs and chest burned, and he had the sensation of a great weight being lifted away. His joints cracked and groaned. There was a rush of vertigo, and for a moment he felt so light he was terrified he'd fly away. After a minute he realised he could feel his sleeves flapping loosely around his arms, the hems of his jeans falling down past his feet.

It was over. He was Tiny Steve again.

He rolled up his sleeves and pant legs, tightened his belt as far as it would go, grabbed his shield and wobbled out of the room on unsteady legs. This wasn't going to be a problem. He could still ride his bike. He'd go over to Sam's and show him what he'd found, and once he'd recovered in the morning he'd come back and stake out the place. Maybe he'd even find Bucky. But then he pushed the front door open, and he thought, okay, fine, that was a bit too optimistic.

The bearded man from earlier was standing on the driveway, blocking the way to his bike. He'd brought a couple of friends. One had what Natasha would call a mullet and the other had a nose ring that made him look like a bull, and all three of them were built like golems. Even if Steve hadn't changed back, he'd still have had to look up at them. "Oh," he said, forcing a smile. "Hi?"

Beardie took a step forward. Steve didn't move. "Where's your brother, kid?"

"Brother?" He glanced past the three men. Still not a problem, he told himself. All he needed to do was slip past them and run for his bike. It was only about ten yards away.

Mullet shoved him in the shoulder. "Hey, rent boy, look at us when we're talking."

All thoughts of running away left his mind. Steve had learnt restraint and discretion in the war, but if one thing hadn't changed, it was that he didn't run from bullies. A knee to the balls for Beardie would be about right, he thought; elbow to the back when he went down, uppercut to Mullet's jaw—"Yeah, big blond guy, looks like you," Beardie was saying. "You tell him we don't like strangers in—what the hell is that?"

Belatedly, Steve realised that he had been raising his shield, moving on instinct to protect his vulnerable stomach and groin, and yeah, he sucked at going undercover. "It's a shield," he snapped. "What else does it look like?"

Nose Ring hooted. "You a cosplayer or some shit? Gimme, I wanna see."

"No," said Steve. He'd never live it down if he let them take his shield. "It's—it's for my brother, he'll be mad."

"C'mon!" Beardie roared, trying to yank it out of his hands.

Several things happened in quick succession. Steve waited for him to get a good grip on it, then let go abruptly and kicked him in the kneecap while he was off balance. Beardie staggered back, cursing. The shield clanged to the floor and started to roll away like a colourful manhole cover, tripping Mullet up as he advanced on Steve. And then, to top it all off, a big black shape dropped down from the porch roof and landed in their midst. Beardie shrieked.

Steve scrambled back against the wall of the house. "Bucky?"

The shape straightened up and took a step forward, towards the three men. They backed away. Bucky was wearing a hoodie that covered his metal arm, but his fingertips gleamed in the cold pale glow of the porch light. "Who are you?" Beardie asked shrilly.

"The brother," Bucky said, and then his fist flew.

There was a loud whirring noise, the same one Steve had heard over and over in his dreams since the fight on the bridge, and Beardie sailed down the driveway like a chunk of debris. Mullet gawked, but Nose Ring rounded on Bucky, so Steve darted in and kicked him in the backs of the knees. He went down, and Steve kicked him again in the head with relish. There, he thought; now this was a proper fight, and not just Bucky swooping in to rescue him from an ass-whooping.

He turned around in time to see Bucky's metal fist connecting with Mullet's jaw (coincidentally, or not, the exact same uppercut Steve had been planning to deal out). The man collapsed onto the asphalt, and Bucky started to stride towards him. "Don't kill them," Steve said hurriedly. "Please, Buck."

Bucky stood where he was, looming silently over the two men. They stirred, looking like a pair of fallen wrestlers, and then Nose Ring staggered to his feet and pulled Mullet up with him. They gave Steve and Bucky a terrified look and went scrambling down the driveway. Steve looked around for the third guy, and saw with relief that Beardie had missed his bike. Bucky, always considerate, had thrown him into the windshield of someone else's car instead. Broken glass littered the ground, and an alarm was going off.

Slowly, Bucky turned around to look at Steve. His hood had fallen back, and his hair was tousled and windblown. "Targets neutralised," he said.

His voice was soft and toneless. It would have terrified Steve, if not for how his head was cocked to one side and his brows lifted as if to share an ironic joke. Steve gazed up at him, wondering if he was hallucinating. "Do not pursue," he whispered.

The corners of Bucky's lips twitched upwards. His features hadn't changed at all. Those were the same lips Steve had once spent an entire art lesson drawing and redrawing, though when his teacher asked, he'd lied and said they belonged to Helena Sims, the prettiest girl in his class. "Hey, Cinderella," Bucky said in a quiet, careful voice. "You dropped your shoe."

He was holding out Steve's shield. "Oh," said Steve, feeling sheepish. He slung it on his arm, the weight awkward in his undersized hands. "You could have shown up earlier, you know. When I still had my white horses and my pumpkin coach."

Bucky considered him for a second. "You look fine like this," he said.

"Skinny?"

Bucky nodded. "I didn't recognise you on the bridge. When you were big. But I do now."

Steve found himself smiling. The car alarm was blaring more loudly than ever, and a couple of police sirens seemed to have joined the racket. He leaned in close to Bucky, looking up at him from under his bangs the way he would have done an age ago. "Let's get out of here," he said, and then the inane thought occurred to him that he was actually picking someone up for the first time in over seventy years. He stifled a burst of hysterical laughter.

"Start the bike," Bucky said. "I'll join you."

My methods are unorthodox, Steve pictured himself telling Nat, but they work.

Bucky vanished into the house and reappeared a moment later, tucking something under his hoodie. He swung up onto the bike, and Steve climbed on behind him, arms clasped round his waist. (Once, before the war, they'd borrowed a friend's bike and Bucky had tried to ride pillion while Steve drove. But the distribution of weight had been all wrong, and they'd crashed so ignominiously in front of so many people that Steve still thanked his lucky stars Vine hadn't existed back then.) "Where are we going?" he asked as they pulled away from the curb.

"My last safehouse," Bucky said. He still drove like a madman, Steve observed, as they hurtled between two parked cars and zoomed out onto the open road. "All the others are compromised."

"But," said Steve twenty minutes later, "that's my house."

As usual, Bucky held out a hand to help Steve as they slid off the bike, and as usual, Steve ignored it. "Like I said. A last resort." Bucky shrugged. His eyes were half-hidden behind a wild fall of hair, and his expression was meticulously blank. "I wouldn't have come here unless—unless."

He didn't finish the sentence. Steve went up on tip-toe and tucked the runaway strands of Bucky's hair behind his ear. "It should have been your first choice," he said, and Bucky gazed at him with a small, perplexed crease between his brows, as though Steve were a sacred and inutterably strange revelation from above.

Steve sent him into the shower as soon as they got inside, then changed into his smaller clothes and set about heating up a leftover stew for both of them. Bucky wandered back out of the bathroom just as he was spooning large helpings into a pair of bowls. "You can help yourself to my wardrobe later," Steve said, when he noticed that Bucky had gotten back into the hoodie and jeans he'd been wearing earlier. "But it won't be flattering, I'm afraid. My day clothes are too big, night clothes too small."

Whenever he'd thought about finding Bucky, he'd fretted about whether Bucky might try to kill him again, if he'd hurt Sam, if he'd even remember who they were. The simpler logistics of providing for Bucky had never even crossed his mind. "S'alright," Bucky said with a wry grin. He sat down at the kitchen table opposite Steve, staring at his hands. "My clothes are clean. I just stole them yesterday."

"Oh," said Steve. He pushed the bigger bowl across the table. Bucky dug in with a sort of controlled ferocity, that of a starving man who was trying his damndest to pretend he wasn't all that hungry. Steve remembered the empty cupboards in his kitchen, and he got up and carried the entire pot of stew over, so Bucky could see there was more. "How were your safehouses compromised?"

"They're not mine," Bucky said. "They're HYDRA's. Lots of us used them."

Steve didn't like to think about how dangerous it had been for Bucky to stay in the house. So many of Pierce's agents were still out there, and last month Rumlow had mysteriously escaped from hospital, third-degree burns and all. "That explains the booby trap," he said. "Wasn't just for me, then?"

"Course not," said Bucky. He glanced up from his stew and offered Steve a smile, small but reassuring. "I had other visitors."

"Who?"

Bucky shrugged. "Who cares? I buried them out back."

"Oh," said Steve again.

He ladled another helping into Bucky's bowl. They ate in silence for a few minutes, Bucky nearly inhaling his food, Steve picking at his. He wasn't quite sure what to say. Conversations had never been this stilted seventy years ago, but somewhere along the line, between the isolation and the brainwashing, they must have fallen out of sync with each other. And that was to be expected, Steve reminded himself, and just this morning he hadn't even been sure if he'd ever see Bucky again. Awkward dinners were plenty to go on.

At length Bucky nudged Steve's foot with his own, and Steve realised he'd forgotten to go through the motions of eating. "Have some more," Bucky said. "Or you'll faint when you change back."

Steve rolled his eyes. God, when Bucky wasn't talking about killing people and referring to HYDRA as 'us', it was like nothing had changed at all. "That was one time."

"Keep it that way." Bucky popped a chunk of meat into Steve's bowl. "Hey, um."

"Yeah?"

"I was joking," Bucky said, staring at his spoon, "when I told that man you were my brother."

Steve blinked. "Yeah, of course?" It wasn't as if anyone would have fallen for that, anyway—they looked nothing alike—and why did it matter? Then he saw that Bucky had coloured a little, and realised all at once what he was trying to ask. He sighed. "Yeah, Buck. We weren't very—brotherly sometimes."

"Huh," Bucky said. He put down his spoon. "So this—this 'Professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies' was right?"

He stuck his hand into his hoodie and pulled out the sheaf of papers Steve had seen in the safehouse. On the top was the last page, the treatise about them. "This," Bucky said.

Steve stared at the page, feeling his throat tighten and swell. For a moment he couldn't speak. This had been their life once, memories they'd made and hoarded together, and now Bucky had been reduced to reading about it online like a college student trying to piece together an essay. "Yeah," he said, balling his fingers into a fist. His heart felt sore and tired. "I've seen that. She's right. Not about everything—some of it is way off base, especially the parts about Peggy, but—"

Bucky leaned forward. "But?"

"But we were together," Steve said. Not wanting to be a coward, he made himself look up from his food and meet Bucky's eyes. Obscurely, he was glad they were having this conversation while he was skinny. The idea of hiding behind Captain America, of towering over Bucky and holding him with arms thick with muscle that still didn't feel like his own, left a bad taste in his mouth. "You were my boyfriend. Or I was yours, whatever. Only we didn't call it that back then. But we—we used to fuck, and you told me you never wanted to get married if you couldn't, um, marry me."

Bucky pursed his lips in thought, stirring his stew absently. "I didn't imagine it, then."

"Hmm?"

"I remember all that," said Bucky. "Us. Together. But the museum exhibit didn't have anything on that, so I thought maybe I'd just made it up in my head. You know, wishful thinking."

"God, no," said Steve. He reached out to take Bucky's flesh hand before he could think better of it. His voice sounded different when he was skinny, and the statement came out more peevish than vehement, but Bucky didn't seem to mind. His fingers closed over Steve's small, fine-boned ones, and his hand trembled slightly. "You didn't make that up," Steve said firmly. "You and I, we go back a long way."

"You and I," Bucky murmured, sounding so awestruck Steve wanted to weep. He squeezed Bucky's hand as hard as he could.

"Yeah," he said, "so here we are. Cards on the table. The ballroom at midnight."

"Though," Bucky said, "I'm not quite Prince Charming." They both laughed, and then everything felt almost normal again.

They washed up in silence, and Steve found Bucky something more comfortable to change into for the night. Then Bucky rubbed his eyes and yawned, and Steve, not wanting to presume or pressure him into anything, brought out the spare duvet and some pillows and laid them out on the couch. Bucky studied the arrangement for a moment, then sat down among the pillows without a word. "Wake me if you need anything," said Steve. "Or even if you can't sleep. I'll get up and we can watch dumb shows and gossip about my friends until you drop off."

Bucky grinned, tentative but sweet. "Okay."

Steve started towards his room, then halted and looked back. Bucky was still seated exactly as he'd left him. "Buck," he said, shifting his weight from foot to foot. "Can you promise me one thing?"

Bucky lifted his head and looked at him. In the dim lamplight, his eyes were keen and appraising, and better yet, they were warm. "Yeah, Stevie, I'll still be here at sunrise," he said. "For when you change back."

Steve swallowed. "Thanks," he said, and made for his room.

He left the door open. He took his shirt off and lay down, but didn't close his eyes. He checked the bedside table for breakables in case he flailed and hit something during one of his violent growth spurts. Then he rolled over onto his side, facing the door, and watched the narrow strip of hallway he could see from his bed.

It took less than five minutes. A shadow detached itself from the dim shapes in the living room and slid soundlessly down the hall. Bucky materialised in the doorway, moving like a ghost, looking like something out of a dream or maybe a vision. He stood there for a moment, considering the space in the queen-sized bed. Then he said, "Steve?"

Steve stirred. "Yes?"

"Do you still get cold at night?"

There was a dull prickling sensation behind his eyes. "Yeah," Steve whispered, "colder than ever," and if his face was wet as Bucky slipped under the covers and threw an arm over him, neither of them mentioned it.

Sometime after midnight, as they lay half-drowsing with their thoughts, Bucky said, "I think I remember something."

Steve was wide awake at once. "Tell me."

"Even if it's bad?"

"Tell me."

There was a pause that might have lasted a few seconds, or a few minutes. Steve's back was pressed against Bucky's chest, and he couldn't see his face. At last Bucky said, "1986. Afghanistan."

In 1986 Steve had been peacefully buried in the Arctic, oblivious to the world tearing itself apart around him. He shifted in Bucky's arms. "Uh-huh."

"I botched a mission," Bucky said quietly. "A major one. An assassination at dawn. You can probably guess why."

Steve squirmed, turning around altogether so he could look at Bucky. "You—you remembered me? That I was going to change back, and I needed you there?"

"Yeah, I s'pose," said Bucky. "I'd been out of cryo a couple of weeks. We were in the middle of the wilderness, no access to anything. I think—I think I'd been dreaming of you. Except, of course, I didn't know it was you."

"Ah."

Bucky pulled Steve's head close to his chest, careful not to touch his bare skin with the cold plates of his metal arm. "I wandered off. Kept thinking there was somewhere I had to be, someone I had to see before the sun came up. Just left my backup team there, forgot all about our target. When I got back half of them were dead." Steve felt Bucky's chest shudder beneath his cheek. "Young men. Not all were HYDRA. Some of them—weren't too bad to me."

That's not your fault, Steve wanted to say, but he didn't know that it was true. It wasn't as if Bucky would believe him. "What happened then?"

"The usual," Bucky said in a low, flat voice. He paused again, and Steve didn't probe further, didn't think he had the stomach for it yet. "That was the last time they let me out of cryo so long."

Steve had no words to offer. He reached up and twined his arms around Bucky's neck instead, and Bucky smoothed down his hair with his flesh hand. "Bad timing," he said. "You need your sleep."

"I'm fine," Steve protested, but Bucky didn't answer him, and he dozed off a few minutes later.

He woke as the first birds were starting to sing. Weak sunlight filtered in through the window and over his face, and there was a dull ache in his muscles. He checked the clock. 06:41. Bucky cracked one bleary eye open and peered at him; the other was invisible under a tangle of hair. "Is it starting?"

"Not yet," Steve said, drowsily content to have Bucky next to him. In the light of day, it was easy to push their late-night confessional from his mind. He could only deal with one sort of pain at a time. "Few minutes more."

He turned over, so Bucky could drape himself across his back like a human blanket, and reached for his phone. "Shit," he said. Sam had texted him eleven times, and tried to call him at intervals during the night. He had five new voicemails. "Shit." He hit the playback button and listened as Sam demanded to know if he was all right, his voice growing steadily more frantic with each successive message. "Shit!"

Bucky squeezed his hand, which was starting to burn as if immersed in acid. "Does he know?"

"What, about us? Or about my—condition?" Steve dropped the phone with a groan and lay back down. Every bone in his body was tingling. "Yes and yes. God, he probably thinks I'm dead. I'm a terrible friend."

"He'll guess I'm with you," Bucky said, his voice low and soothing and as unruffled as ever. "He's probably watching from your neighbour's roof with a sniper rifle right now—"

"No, that's what you'd do."

"—but he struck me as the reasonable sort," Bucky continued, "so I doubt he'll fire on me. Since I'll have to help you through it. Breathe, Steve."

"Real comforting, Buck," Steve muttered. He turned his face into the pillow and let out a noise that was half whine, half sob.

"Shh." Bucky rubbed soothing circles into his back, cradling him only loosely so neither of them got hurt when Steve grew over a hundred pounds of solid muscle in a matter of seconds. "It'll be over soon. Just hold my hand, all right?"

They'd done this hundreds of times, in army bunks and lumpy sleeping bags and—on one memorable occasion—tied back to back on a sunlit lawn while Schmidt's firing squad loaded up their guns around them, but this iteration of Bucky was new and unfamiliar. Last night Steve wouldn't have imagined that the metal arm could be so gentle, but it was skin-warm now from their shared body heat and whirring almost affectionately as the fingers carded through his hair. He groaned, and pounded his fist on the bedside table, and let loose every foul word he'd ever learnt in the army and would never have used in the presence of anyone else but Bucky. "Hey, I've got you," Bucky said, breath warm on the shell of Steve's ear. "Easy, big boy. Nearly done now."

Pain lanced through his arms, and then his back and legs. He felt heavier, too heavy, like he was going to implode because his skin and skeleton couldn't keep all that weight together. He drew

breath to scream, and then his lungs opened and a giddy rush of oxygen hit his brain. The room seemed to spin sideways. Fleeting, he wondered if he would still have gone into Erskine's capsule if he'd known how much pain he'd have to go through, not just once but every sunrise for the rest of his life. He might have taken it all back. It wasn't worth it, not for that sweet old man, not for Peggy, not even for America. But then again, someone had to save Bucky—

"There," Bucky said, stroking his hair back from his brow. "There you are. Look at you. You're ridiculous."

The bed felt smaller. He rolled onto his back, gasping for air, and heard the springs of the mattress creak beneath him. Bucky pressed a kiss to his sweaty forehead. "It's over, Stevie."

Steve flexed his arms, kicked out his legs. Everything was in working order. When he pressed a finger to the pulse point on his throat, his heart rate was settling back down to a stately sixty. "I'm all right," he said. "S'better when you're here."

"Hurts less?" Bucky asked, gazing at him anxiously.

Steve shook his head. He didn't have to hide anything from Bucky, not even his weakness. "But it doesn't feel so drawn out," he said. "And it reminds me why I did this in the first place."

Even now, he still became dizzy with relief when it was over. Borne high on a surge of endorphins, he bundled Bucky into his arms, breathing in the fresh minty smell of his own shampoo in the messy brown hair. Bucky gave a muffled squawk of protest. His shoulders had gone all tense, and suddenly he seemed small and almost fragile in Steve's arms. Steve let go quickly. "Hey," he murmured.

Bucky looked up at him, frowning. A lost look had come into his eyes. "What."

"You're not gonna leave now, are you?" Steve asked. "D'you know how much I missed you?"

Bucky's scowl deepened. "Did you?" he said. "You've got Sam."

"Buck."

"I could just come back in the evenings," Bucky mused. His metal fingers traced the contour of Steve's bicep. "Watch over you when you get tiny, pull you out of fights, hold you when you change back. Make you cook me breakfast, and then leave."

Steve made a sad sound low in his throat. He wasn't sure how serious Bucky was. "And go where? You've got no safehouses left."

"Steal a car," Bucky suggested. "Break into rich folks' houses and sleep in their beds while they're at work."

Steve snorted. "You'd go to jail, and I'd get beat up and no one would come save me."

"It would serve you right."

Steve smiled. He propped himself up on an elbow and looked down at Bucky, at the man with whom he'd been in one form of love or another ever since they'd met, when they were nothing but a pair of scrappy kids with scraped knees and scuffed knuckles, and he was too young to even know what love was. He wanted to kiss Bucky over and over again, to hold him tight and tell him he'd never let go, but there would be time for that later. For now it was enough that Bucky remembered him—had remembered him in Afghanistan, even, wrung dry and adrift among strangers—and that they were together now.

"Bucky," Steve said, "you know I'm still me, right? Even with all this." He gestured at himself, at the muscles and everything. "And you're still you, whatever you want that to mean."

"I don't feel like that sometimes," Bucky said softly.

"Me neither," Steve admitted. "But we have to give it time." He took Bucky's metal hand and pressed it lightly to his lips, and Bucky let him, his expression a study in wonderment. "Stay with me, Buck. Just like old times."

Bucky glanced away for a moment. When he looked back, his eyes were wide and over-bright, but there was a tiny smile playing on his lips. "Okay," he said. He leaned over to grope around on the floor on the opposite side of the bed, and came back up with Steve's phone. "Now do me a favour and tell your friend I haven't abducted you for my own nefarious purposes, will you?"

"Quite the opposite, I'll assure him." Steve took the phone and scrolled through his alerts. "Nat, too. She's been trying to set me up on a date."

Bucky narrowed his eyes, into which a shadow of his old cockiness had returned. "A date? With who?"

"Some cute, bespectacled accountant who's friends with Peggy's great-niece," Steve said, matching Bucky's tone of disbelief. "I couldn't make this up if I tried."

Bucky's arm clanked menacingly. "Cancel it," he said, and grinning, Steve did as he was told.